



4-22-2011

Reception and Influence of a Postmodernist Opera : John Adams' Nixon in China , 1987-2011

Casey Jo Brege
Butler University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ugtheses>



Part of the [Other Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brege, Casey Jo, "Reception and Influence of a Postmodernist Opera : John Adams' Nixon in China , 1987-2011" (2011).
Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection. Paper 105.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact fgaede@butler.edu.

BUTLER UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

Honors Thesis Certification

Applicant Casey Jo Brege

Thesis title Reception and Influence of a Postmodern opera: John Adams's Nixon in China, 1987-2011

Intended date of commencement May 14, 2011

Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s) James R. Briscoe Mar. 23, 2011
Date

JAMES R. BRISCOE MAR. 23, 2011
Date

Reader(s) Sarah J. Eyerly April 7, 2011
Date

Certified by Judith Harper Morrell June 2, 2011
Director, Honors Program Date

For Honors Program use:

Level of Honors conferred: University Magna Cum Laude
Departmental Music with High Honors

Reception and Influence of a Postmodernist Opera:
John Adams's *Nixon in China*, 1987-2011

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Music

Jordan College of Fine Arts

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Casey Jo Brege

04/22/2011

Contents

Introduction	1
Contemporary Culture on the Opera Stage: Critical Reception, 1987-88	4
Temporal Distance as a Classicizing Force: Critical Reception Post-1987	23
An American Opera Abroad: International Reception, 1992-2000	36
To the New York Metropolitan Opera and Beyond: <i>Nixon in China</i> as a Contemporary Classic	42
Summary	47

Introduction

Nixon in China resulted from a joint effort between three Harvard graduates: composer John Adams, librettist Alice Goodman, and director Peter Sellars. Conceived in late 1984, the opera premiered with the Houston Opera Company in October of 1987. The work chronicled President Nixon's 1972 trip to Communist China, presenting audiences with a monumental depiction of a controversial event in contemporary political history. The primary interest of the work's creators did not rest solely with the political nature of the piece, but on the potential of the contemporaneous subject matter to create an opera capable of transcending the traditional operatic audience. In the words of John Adams: "[T]here is always something that's tangentially related to this subject [of *Nixon in China*] going on in the world, which maybe suggests that this is the proper thing for opera to do. It was certainly the case in Verdi and Wagner's time. Opera addressed hotly debated issues that people thought about all the time."¹

From the time of the work's genesis, it was perceived as historicizing its contemporaneous subject matter, rather than satirizing it. The portrayal of Richard Nixon, Chairman Mao, and the opera's other politically volatile characters does not intend to pass moral judgment or to create heroes and villains in any traditional sense. Rather, the opera seeks to capture the spirit of Nixon's historic visit as a moment of modern myth. This point of artistic departure generated enormous critical backlash. At the work's premiere, reception was starkly divided, with supporters praising Nixon as an instant contemporary classic, and detractors accusing the piece of naiveté or outright

¹ Andrew Porter, "'Nixon in China': John Adams in Conversation," *Tempo* new series, no. 167 (December 1988): 25.

propagandizing. The proximity of the work's debut with the events it depicts creates an audience with an array of complex emotional responses to its startlingly contemporary cast of characters. To some, this represented the resurgence of the operatic genre into American culture. For others, it indicated the idiom's further undoing and removal from the influence of operatic masters of the past.

Adams's post-minimalist musical aesthetic generated equally wide ranging critical response. In 1987, the term minimalism was essentially inseparable from the techniques of Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Terry Riley, and a few others. This music still retained certain cultural connotations that continued to linger from criticism of the genre in its early stages. The repetition and rhythmic phasing techniques of early minimalism were often misunderstood as simplistic, and sometimes accused of echoing the consumerist culture that marked the era.² Adams's music, while markedly different from his predecessors, remained to some critics a dubious form of operatic expression. Many accused it of banality, or merely continuing in a trend set by Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*. Even in positive reviews, his musical technique was regularly viewed as a vehicle for the work's libretto, rather than a contribution to the drama itself.

After its somewhat controversial early performances in 1987 and 88, *Nixon in China* took an almost fifteen year hiatus from major opera companies in the United States. It premiered abroad in France, Germany, Finland, Australia, and received an unstaged debut in the United Kingdom. It returned to the U.S. in 2004 by way of the Minnesota Opera Company, and a debut of Minneapolis. Since then, *Nixon in China* has been performed in St. Louis, Chicago, Cincinnati, Denver, Long Beach, and Vancouver.

² Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 62.

It received its New York Metropolitan Opera debut in February 2011. Reviews of these later performances indicate resurgence in popularity and a greater critical grasp of the work's fundamental dramatic and musical dynamic. In the intervening years since the work's premiere, the power negative feelings associated with its principle characters have dimmed in cultural memory, allowing for the overarching statement of the opera to be foremost in the audience's minds. Elements of the production first analyzed as politically naïve, have been reexamined as insightful, if not prophetic.

Contemporary Culture on the Opera Stage: Critical Reception, 1987-88

The initial reception of *Nixon in China* was hugely varied. The work was highly visible in both print and television media, with a PBS broadcast shortly following the Houston premiere, and a recording release in 1988 by Nonesuch Records. This level of exposure, along with the opera's extremely contemporary subject matter made for a great deal of publicity from *Nixon's* genesis in 1984 to its 1987 premiere at the Houston Grand Opera's Wortham Theater. A work taken from events less than two decades past and populated by characters whose names still graced the pages of newspapers around the country was both groundbreaking and controversial. The critics' reception at the work's initial performances ranged from calling *Nixon in China* "sophomoric twaddle" to declaring that "it gives new hope for the future of opera as a living and growing art."^{3 4}

Those critics who found the opera's debut favorable tended toward the exorbitant in their praise and predictions of *Nixon's* historic significance in the opera repertoire. Michael Walsh from *Time Magazine* called the piece "the most important new opera since Philip Glass gave voice to Mohandas Gandhi in *Satyagrah*."⁵ *Christian Science Monitor* music critic, Thor Eckert Jr., called the Houston premiere "a triumph" and the

³ Martin Bernheimer, "Gala Opera Premiere: John Adams' 'Nixon in China' in Houston," *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 1987. http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-24/entertainment/ca-3984_1_opera-premiere (accessed 27 May, 2010).

⁴ Joseph McLellan, "The Revolutionary 'Nixon'; At the Kennedy Center, a Classic in the Making," *The Washington Post*, March 28, 1988. <http://www.lexisnexis.com/> (accessed 24 May, 2010).

⁵ Michael Walsh, "Adams: Nixon in China," *Time Magazine*, November 9, 1987.

opera itself “unexpectedly magnificent.”⁶ To the opera’s devotees, *Nixon* was a source of new operatic invention and, in the case of Joseph McLellan’s lavish review, likely to hold the key to renewed interest and relevance in American opera.

The work’s dramatic potential for engaging audience members—both opera novices and veterans alike—with its startlingly contemporary and politically relevant subject matter was a primary source of its initial acclaim. In *USA Today*, Adams told music critic David Patrick Stearns, “If I said I was writing an opera about Ulysses, people would yawn and forget about it. . . but everyone has a very complex set of emotions on these characters.”⁷ According to the opera’s major proponents, this invocation of public memory is indicative of the operatic future: “A warning is necessary for those who judge operas by their resemblance to ‘La Traviata,’ ‘Madame Butterfly’ or even ‘Boris Godunov’: ‘Nixon in China’ is not like that. It probably represents the opera of the future, but it may shock or upset people devoted to the opera of the past.”⁸ In terms of dramatic conveyance, *Nixon* presented a style new to major operatic production. It is one part historic narrative, one part humorous political parody, and one part deeply personal memoir. For many patrons of traditional opera at the work’s premiere, this three-fold approach to the dramatic material presented a disjunctive and unnecessary break from the classic operatic formula.

⁶ Thor Eckert Jr., “‘Nixon in China’: stunning opera inspired by historic meeting,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 27, 1987.

<http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/delivery> (accessed 27 May, 2010).

⁷ David Patrick Stearns, “‘Nixon in China’: Opera’s next wave,” *USA Today* October 27, 1987. <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/USAToday/access/55757631.html> (accessed 24 May, 2010).

⁸ McLellan, *The Washington Post*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/>.

Each of *Nixon*'s three acts encapsulates a level of personal revelation and development for the major characters. The opera moves from a realm of almost satirical diplomatic formality and political anxiety, to a deeply personal portrayal of the characters' inner, often unseen humanity. The initial act focuses on the American and Chinese politicians in their historically recognized positions of political significance. It simultaneously presents the characters as genuine reflections of their cultures at large, and as parodical references to the grandiose political world that they represent. In his opening aria, President Nixon expresses the Americans' position as emissaries entering into the unknown, as well as his own awareness of the enormous historical impact of their actions. The depth of meaning and complexity of artistic intent in the work's dramatic structure presented for early critics—proponents and detractors alike—a large artistic pill to swallow. In terms of traditional operatic emotional configuration and clarity, *Nixon in China* appears obtuse by comparison. The work does not offer audiences a straightforward explanation or evocation of emotions as related to the opera's historically relevant and complicatedly portrayed cast of characters. This, coupled with the range of preconceptions and politically motivated associations held by American viewers only thirteen years removed from Nixon's infamous Watergate scandal, creates a complex backdrop for the work's dramatic elements.

In positive reviews, the work's contemporary emotional capacity and revolutionary potential were perceived, though even its supporters did not immediately understand the greater artistic purpose of the work. Important elements of irony and parody were rarely mentioned with the exception of Joseph McLellan's account of the 1988 Kennedy Center premiere, described in his *Washington Post* article as "the puffings

and posturings of diplomacy.”⁹ The grand opera idiom in relation to the parodical representation of formal political occasions remained entirely unrecognized in even the most perceptive early critical commentaries. The work presents itself as a descent inward from characters’ diplomatic facades to their deepest personal struggles and insecurity, in the face of which they are removed entirely from the political sphere and even from one another. *Nixon in China*’s staging responds to and mirrors this progression. The enormous scope of the work’s opening satirizes the grand opera genre and the forced enormity of Nixon and Mao’s first encounter. As the layers of characterization are slowly stripped away, the grand scale of the staging itself is similarly simplified. The final, most personally telling scene contains nothing more than two dormitories alone and spotlighted on an otherwise empty stage. As much as the work moves from the public to the personal in both scope and content, it also traverses the distance between parody and sincerity.

Nixon in China’s gradual alteration in artistic intent creates an absence of either blatant political satire or genuine heroic depiction. In that absence many early reviewers commented instead on purely surface qualities of the opera’s characters. Ann Holmes of *The Houston Chronicle* referred to the Nixon’s “likable neighborhood types —she with her homilies and he with his tales of grilling ‘burgers for the fellows in Vietnam.’”¹⁰ Descriptions such as this hold a measure of outward truth, but they do not fully probe the depth of meaning behind the opera’s characterization. Pat Nixon’s “homilies” juxtapose

⁹ McLellan, *The Washington Post*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/>.

¹⁰ Ann Holmes, “‘Nixon in China’ even but has points of brilliance,” *The Houston Chronicle*, October 23, 1987. http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl?id=1987_497539 (accessed 24 May, 2010).

her demure public persona as the wife of the president and her poignantly idealistic inner self as revealed in her Act 2 aria. Richard Nixon's reminiscing in Act 3 is more than a demonstration of his relatability. Nor is it a continuation of Nixon's representation of Americana. His final moments of reflections and reminiscing offer a glance into his inner struggles and insecurity in the face of his life's immense complexity, as well as his struggle to find true intimacy outside the contrived political realm. When placed against the first Act's grandeur, this realistically human side of these larger-than-life characters creates an enhanced sense of the immensity of their political deeds. Of *Nixon in China*'s proponents, McLellan was the most acutely aware of the composer, director and librettist's intentions: "Its [*Nixon's*] primary subjects include the smallness of 'great men' and the triviality inevitable even in the most historic occasions. It is also an opera about culture shock, the puffings and posturings of diplomacy, varieties of political philosophy and the values of simple, friendly human contact."¹¹

To disparagers of *Nixon in China*, the dramatic elements of work represented a confusing and often disconnected array of stylistic and emotional elements. The opera's dramatic components, so praised by some were described as "a visually striking, but coy and insubstantial work"¹² and as "a sappy picture book."¹³ The dramatic treatment of controversial figures such as President Nixon and Mao Zedong was, to some reviewers, an unrealistic and puzzling aspect of the production. In an interview with University of California Davis doctoral student Matthew Daines, John Adams said of critics' reaction

¹¹ McLellan, *The Washington Post*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/>.

¹² Donal Henahan, "Opera: 'Nixon in China'," *The New York Times*, October 24, 1987. <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/24/art/opera-nixon-in-china.html> (accessed 21 May, 2010).

¹³ Manuela Hoelterhoff, "'Nixon' in Texas Sings for His (Chinese) Supper," *The Wall Street Journal* October 29, 1987. <http://proquest.umi.com/> (accessed 21 May, 2010).

to his portrayal of Nixon, "I was amused that certain people in New York...took us [Adams, Sellars, and Goodman] to task because we were too nice to the Nixon character."¹⁴ Manuela Hoelterhoff of *The Wall Street Journal* was one of many critical of Adams's portrayal of President Nixon: "This is an airbrushed, upbeat portrait of our 37th president and his wife, Pat. Once upon a time in the baroque era, gilded baskets conveyed helpful gods to the realm of muddling mortals. This opera opens with the Nixons slowly floating down to China in a jet."¹⁵ The comparison of President Nixon and the first lady to baroque depictions of gods, and of China as the "realm of muddling mortals" conveys a distinctly sardonic tone. In the minds of the work's creators, the Americans are not superiors descending to bring order to a troubled land, but isolated individuals entering into the unknown, acutely aware of their roles in the history of world politics.

Hoelterhoff was not alone in her skewed perception of the opera's dramatic purpose in its portrayal of the principle characters. In his review of the 1987 Houston premiere, the *New York Times*'s Donal Henahan referred to Richard and Pat Nixon as "innocents abroad, a confused Rotarian couple swept up in incomprehensible events." Instead of recognizing sincerity in the characters' depictions, Henahan's review indicates the presence of political naivety and artistic banality. He further provided readers with his own scathing version of a plot synopsis:

Miss Goodman's purposely oblique libretto is a gentle put-on, a fantasy on the theme of Mr. Nixon's famous trip. Accompanied by his loyal wife Pat and diplomatic sidekick Kissinger, he meets Zhou Enlai and Mao. He attends a

¹⁴ Matthew Daines, "Telling the Truth About Nixon: Parody, Cultural Representation, and Gender Politics in John Adams's Opera *Nixon in China*." (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Davis), 108.

¹⁵ Hoelterhoff, *The Wall Street Journal*. <http://proquest.umi.com/>.

banquet where many toasts to both countries are drunk. Pat ventures outside and sees some people who are not like us. Dick and Pat attend a performance of 'The Red Detachment of Women' at the Beijing Opera and somehow become entangled in the violent action, which features a Kissinger look-alike as the villain. . . . The opera tails off into a long, portentous coda in which Dick, Pat, Zhou Enlai, Kissinger, Mao and Madame Mao go to bed in what appears to be a dormitory, capping off the night with meandering soliloquies of enigmatic meaning.¹⁶

This rendition of the American diplomats' experience in China does not capture the depth of meaning intended by Adams, Sellars, and Goodman any more than Hoelterhoff's mockingly Baroque depiction in *The Wall Street Journal*. The opera portrays the great deeds of ultimately ordinary individuals, with all their usual failings and painful insecurities, against the backdrop of the complexities of clashing political ideologies. Elements of the heroic and the mythological in *Nixon in China* stem from characters' recognition of the enormity of the task faced they face. Henahan's is an oversimplified depiction of elements of the monumental in the opera's scope. Political satire was the expected lens through which *Nixon in China's* larger-than-life figures would be portrayed. When that artistic device was not the primary vehicle of expression, the work's intended sincerity and historical depth were often mistaken for political naivety and inanity.

Adams's score generated discord among critics. The general musical framework of *Nixon in China* is likely the cause of critical contention and accusations of banality. For those who disparaged the opera's dramatic aspects, its music entertained elements of equally opaque artistic intent. References to *Nixon in China's* score after its initial performances in 1987-88 indicate a general misinterpretation as to the intended musical

¹⁶ Henahan, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/24/art/opera-nixon-in-china.html>.

and dramatic forces present in the work. Perhaps most memorable of these critical commentaries was Henahan's claim that "Mr. Adams does for the arpeggio what McDonald's did for the hamburger, grinding out one simple idea unto eternity."¹⁷ Adams's compositional style did not immediately attain understanding or approval as a vehicle for the grand, mythologizing expression strived for in *Nixon in China*. The composer's usage of the postminimalist idiom was not recognized for its expressive potential in the operatic medium, and critics and proponents alike wildly misunderstood his artistic intentions in the minimalist elements of the score. Those critical of the work often interpreted elements of stasis in his compositional style as a mere backdrop against which the drama of the opera takes place, and a distraction to the overarching theatrical structure and meaning.

Many early reviewers did not fully consider the cohesion of libretto and compositional style achieved through the synthesis of Goodman's character-driven textual idiosyncrasies, and Adams's transparent, driving and often repetitious musical texture. Those who disapproved of Adams's stylistic choices decried the score as uninteresting and unresponsive in terms of dramatic interpretation. Martin Bernheimer of the *Los Angeles Times* referred to the score as "dauntlessly repetitive" and in desperate need of an "enriched musical fabric, not to mention theatrical elaboration."¹⁸ In a letter to the editor of *The Washington Post*, Washington D.C. resident, Christopher Roberts said, "Mr. Adams' 'minimalist' score had all the droning 'eloquence' of an overloaded power transformer. Rather than advancing or enhancing the message of the inaudible

¹⁷ Henahan, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/24/art/opera-nixon-in-china.html>.

¹⁸ Bernheimer, *Los Angeles Times*, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-24/entertainment/ca-3984_1_opera-premiere.

lyrics, it was a distraction.”¹⁹ In *Nixon in China*, the repetition and sparseness of harmonic fabric quintessential to the postminimalist idiom serves a greater dramatic cause than poetic interpretation. Its “dauntlessly repetitive” structure creates a musical conduit removed from traditional operatic expectations and conventions capable of preserving the fundamental historical elements of the opera’s larger-than-life characters. In order to attain the necessary sense of realism, the score must contain and reflect recognized elements of these individuals’ speech and genuine intellectual presence.

In Adams’s mind, his compositional choices directly reflect important components of realism in the dramatic production. Repetitive rhythmic motives, melodic cells, and the slow harmonic rhythm that trademark minimalism enhance the repetitive elements inherent in the making of foreign policy and international politics reenacted on the stage. Adams’s music serves to illuminate the opera’s parody of the 1980’s “Reagan-era” politics in which every political appearance was intensely controlled and phrases of diplomatic optimism were repeated *ad nauseum*.²⁰ This musical interpretation is evident from the moment the curtain rises and a life-size replica of Air Force One descends to the stage in what Donal Henahan referred to as a “clever scenic effect.”²¹ The orchestra accompanies this instance of extraordinary historical pomp and circumstance with equal bombast. Though sweeping brass fanfares punctuate the score, the texture does not entirely depart from Adams’s trademark postminimalism. The musical backbone consists primarily of repeated scalar elements, imparting upon the scene a sense of steadily

¹⁹ Christopher Roberts, “‘Nixon in China’: A Bore,” *The Washington Post*, April 15, 1988. <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/delivery/> (accessed 24 May, 2010).

²⁰ Daines, *Telling the Truth About Nixon*, 93.

²¹ Henahan, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/24/art/opera-nixon-in-china.html>.

building anticipation. Adams's "overloaded power transformer" creates in the work's opening an expressively vital element of the nervous grandiosity present in this moment of great historical significance.

As the President's plane makes its final descent, the musical texture rapidly thins and a chorus of Chinese peasants enters, extolling the triumphs and wisdom of the Chinese communist regime. The entirely homorhythmic melody possesses an almost chant-like quality against the orchestra's intensely scalar accompaniment. The peasants' first chorus presents an overview of Communist social principles, intoning lines such as, "Your master is the laborer, [w]ho rules the world with truth and grace. Deal with him justly, face to face." It creates an ideological contrast between East and West, made starker by the individual grandiosity of the Americans' entrance. The chorus establishes a sense of the alien world into which the diplomats are entering, and invites questions as to the accuracy of their—and in turn, Western audience members'—assumptions about the Chinese culture and values. Both here and later in Act II, the chorus's most important task is to convey the libretto and with it, a sense of the Chinese public's ideology in terms of their political system and reaction to the political discourse occurring around them. It creates a dichotomy between the political perceptions of the Chinese citizens and the American figureheads.

President Nixon descends to the tarmac after the final message of the peasants' chorus: "The people are the heroes now, Behemoth pulls the peasant's plow." His presence creates a political juxtaposition against the unified sound of the Chinese civilians. Nixon's first aria presents an archetypal example of Adams's compositional practice as reflective of the opera's historicizing and politicizing components. Both the

musical texture and libretto emphasize Nixon's frantic internal dialogue and stilted speech patterns for which the political leader was often recognized. The President reflects Adams's characteristic compositional techniques, allowing for the text to move to the forefront of attention. In terms of President Nixon's first aria, the texture of the orchestra is based in primarily triadic material—though not in a traditionally tonal sense—and uses this material in a repetitive manner. Nixon's vocal line is of a similar character. The soloist intones only a C-natural for the aria's first eleven measures, and repeats the word "news" twelve times from m. 374 to m. 391.

Capturing a sense of Richard Nixon the historical figure, as opposed to Richard Nixon the opera character served as a catalyst for Adams's compositional approach to the character, both in the opening scene and throughout the opera. The 37th President's idiomatic speech patterns echoed endlessly from American television screens and the subject of unrelenting satire must be reflected in Adams's musical portrayal of his operatic facsimile. The orchestra echoes the repetition in the vocal line. Adams's "dauntlessly repetitive. . . outlines of recycled-romantic music" are in response to Nixon's stuttering and repetitious melody, which in turn responds to the publicly observed characteristics of the man himself. The centering of an artistic work on contemporarily relevant and exceptionally public individuals necessitates the visibility of their recognizable, authentic characteristics within the dramatic interpretation. This remains true in both the portrayal of Richard Nixon and *Nixon in China*'s other politically charged characters. The postminimalist compositional idiom leaves space in which preconceptions and emotional associations of the opera's characters may retain their

shape in audiences' minds. Yet the score simultaneously lifts these often biased perceptions to the realm of the heroic and mythological.

The Pat Nixon portrayed in *Nixon in China* is the antithesis of her husband, both musically and dramatically. While Richard Nixon attends diplomatic meetings of historic importance, she tours the streets of Beijing. While the President and Chairman Mao exchange political rhetoric and create foreign policy, Mrs. Nixon explores a factory and a community farm. In the opera's first two Acts, she presents the face of the American people to the Chinese. Pat Nixon is the character most closely attuned to the experiences and values of the common citizen. Her idealism and sincerity embody these traits in her culture at large, and the encounters she has with the Chinese public represent the true meeting of East and West. Unlike the work's more blatantly political characters, the First Lady is never satirized. Adams's compositional choices serve to render her in this light, and with as much a sense of realism as afforded Richard Nixon in his "News" aria.

This treatment of her character did not escape intense criticism after the opera's 1987 premiere. The most critical commentary came in the form of Christopher Roberts's letter to the editor in *The Washington Post* in which he described Pat Nixon's character as "a ditz worthy of 'I Love Lucy.'"²² As she tours Beijing in Act II, Mrs. Nixon marvels at the wonder present in ordinary things. She explains in the opening line of her aria, "I don't daydream and don't look back... I treat each day like Christmas." Pat Nixon's scene of personal and social discovery creates a musical and dramatic dichotomy between herself and the political dignitaries with whom she interacts. As with the portrayal of President Nixon, moments of emotional depth in Pat Nixon's character were often

²² Roberts, *The Washington Post*. <http://www.lexisnexus.com/us/Inacademic/delivery/>.

characterized as satirical, or at the very least naïve. Manuel Hoelterhoff summed up the entirety of Pat's encounters and revelations in a single sentence: "'Piggy. Piggy. Piggy. Piggy. . . ' babbles a cheerful chorus of Chinese women as Pat tours a model farm and gawps at a big sow as if she's the Winged Victory of Samothrace."²³

Hoelterhoff's literal observation of the music at this moment in Act II as a "parody of his [Adams's] own compositional style" does little to probe the depth of Pat Nixon herself. The elements of humor present in Adams's self-parodying repetition are not the foremost focus of his musical portrayal of the First Lady. The lyrical nature of her lines further removes her from the cyclic political platitudes of the first Act, and reflects the honesty of her character. The orchestral writing retains much of Adams's quintessential postminimalism, which prevents Pat Nixon from becoming too far musically divorced from the rest of the work, but the driving repetition that characterizes the President's vocal lines is entirely removed from her arias. The confusion this generated in early reviews is apparent from the repeated iterations of Pat Nixon's simplicity of character.

The musical lyricism Adams presents does not indicate simplicity of mind or unintentional banality, but rather imbues Mrs. Nixon with a depth of genuine wisdom lacking in other characters. In a sense, only Chou Enlai, Mao's enigmatic advisor, equals Pat Nixon in emotional depth. In both cases, the individuals are represented by a straight-forwardness in comparison to their more politicized and counterparts of President Nixon and Mao Zedong. Unlike the First Lady, Chou Enlai is not so musically removed from the styles of the President and the Chairman. His character garnered more

²³ Hoelterhoff, *The Wall Street Journal*, <http://proquest.umi.com/>.

immediate understanding and respect from the work's early critics, with even Martin Bernheimer as one of the work's most vehement critics describing his portrayal as "a poetic visionary."²⁴

Reviewers granted very little of the same kindness to Pat Nixon. In the same review, Bernheimer decried the depiction of her character as "housewifely bathos."²⁵ Pat Nixon confounded most of *Nixon in China*'s first reviewers, who tended to view her character as one-dimensional and hackneyed, or refrained from discussing her presence in the opera at all. Far from being an incidental inclusion, Mrs. Nixon represents the values and ideology of her culture—American culture—in a way her husband cannot, and as such she maintains an unsurpassed level of importance in the work's overarching dichotomy between the historical figures as individuals and as representations of their societies at large. The misunderstanding of her character present in reviews of the opera's premiere indicates the general misconception of Nixon in China during its earliest performances.

Equally misconstrued by critics, yet of an entirely different artistic purpose are the characters of Chairman Mao's wife, Chiang Ch'ing, and Henry Kissinger. They provide the opera with its only true source of satire and genuine negativity. Arriving with the Americans is Henry Kissinger, who plays the comic foil. Madame Mao serves as Kissinger's dramatic counterpart on the side of the Chinese. Neither character fully participates in the redeeming journey from the public to the personal shared in by the others. The sense of isolation centers particularly on Kissinger, who is not even present

²⁴ Bernheimer, *Los Angeles Times*, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-24/entertainment/ca-3984_1_opera-premiere.

²⁵ Bernheimer, *Los Angeles Times*, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-24/entertainment/ca-3984_1_opera-premiere.

during the final scene.) Their depictions alone invite the audience to pass absolute judgment. On the surface, the intended distaste for Madame Mao and Kissinger is present in many early reviews. Bernheimer described Kissinger as “a buffoon” and Madame Mao as “an erotic shrew.”²⁶ Manuel Hoelterhoff provided readers with an even more imaginative description of Kissinger: “Only Henry Kissinger gets no respect. He walks around with his tongue hanging out, uttering inanities and peering over the ugliest glasses in the history of optometry.”²⁷ In these critical reviews, the negativity on the behalf of Chiang Ch’ing and Kissinger was received with confusion, if not outright hostility. Contrasted with the humanizing light in which the other politicians are portrayed, the harshness of their depictions seemed to many an affront against the work’s overall artistic integrity. If political caricatures are to become human beings and human beings to grow into modern myth, the blatant parody of Kissinger and Madame Mao presented, in audiences’ minds, a contradictory message.

Madame Mao and Kissinger represent their respective cultural ideology taken to the most damaging extreme. Kissinger’s position as the work’s “buffoon” reflects stereotypical Western ignorance, and assumptions of cultural superiority in the face of unfamiliar social values. Chiang Ch’ing, by contrast, epitomizes Communist zeal gone awry. She is portrayed as violent and unsympathetic to any cause but her own. Where the other characters retain elements of their personal humanity throughout their diplomatic ideal, the satirized duo are only representative in nature, though much of Madame Mao’s portrayal also strives for a measure of historical accuracy. As embodiments of the

²⁶ Bernheimer, *Los Angeles Times*, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-24/entertainment/ca-3984_1_opera-premiere.

²⁷ Hoelterhoff, *The Wall Street Journal*, <http://proquest.umi.com/>.

Eastern and Western societies' most corrupting aspects, they do not share in the mythologizing nature of their counterparts.

The underlying artistic purpose of the two characters comes to a head during Madame Mao's violent socialist-realist ballet, *The Red Detachment of Women*. Musically, the scene invokes the grandiosity of Wagner as a disguised Kissinger portrays a tyrannical landlord savagely whipping a serf woman. Chairman Mao's secretarial trio, dubbed the "Mao-ettes" intone the ominous line, "Young as we are, we expect fear, every year more of us bow beneath the shadow of the next blow. Down on all fours our grandfathers swallow abuse as if by choice, the humble flesh kisses the lash. . ."²⁸ Pat Nixon becomes so entangled in the action she interferes against Kissinger on the behalf of the persecuted serf woman. As the ballet comes to its violent, bombastic conclusion Madame Mao's coloratura dominates the musical texture, though she does not depart from Adams's postminimalist musical idiom.

The inclusion of *The Red Detachment of Women* in the opera received mixed reviews from early critics. Many considered the ballet a confusing addition to the work's plot. According to Hoelterhoff:

Attending [*The Red Detachment of Women*] Pat gets so frazzled seeing a slave girl whipped by. . . Kissinger in slight disguise that she leaps to the stage to rescue the damsel. . . [B]efore you can recite the revolution's three rules of discipline and eight points of attention, there's total pandemonium. Mr. Adams helps the fun by quoting purple passages from Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner when a soldier revives the brave slave with a glass of orange juice.²⁹

²⁸ Adams, John. *Nixon in China* (vocal score), libretto by Allison Goodman, Hendon Music, 1999.

²⁹ Hoelterhoff, *The Wall Street Journal*, , <http://proquest.umi.com/>.

The “total pandemonium” that concludes *The Red Detachment* does not function as the overarching purpose of the scene. Rather, the presence of Madame Mao’s socialist-realist ballet serves as an affiliation between Chiang Ch’ing and Kissinger, as well as a physical representation of the dichotomy between the two characters, and the Nixon’s. It showcases and enhances satirical elements in their characterization through Adams’s use of quotation. The invocation of Wagner reiterates the grand opera parody present in the work’s opening scene. Madame Mao and Henry Kissinger exemplify the opera’s most satirical elements, and Adams’s capitalizes on this through his use of quotation in a distinctly sarcastic manner. Adams’s creates a sense of the exaggerated nature of Chiang Ch’ing and Kissinger’s characters. Pat Nixon’s interference with the ballet juxtaposes her sincerity against Kissinger’s parodical representation. This, in turn, creates a comparison between American ideals and American prejudices. The overarching significance of Madame Mao and Henry Kissinger’s characters is to generate a comparison between the ideological extremes present in both American and Chinese cultures. Adams’s quotations create a musical space in which this dichotomy may reside. Such an obvious break from his typical compositional device presents an obvious contrast between the ballet—i.e. Madame Mao and Kissinger—and the rest of the opera’s characters.

Early critics did not immediately grasp the complexity of *Nixon in China* as demonstrated by the multi-dimensional elements present in the major characters. Even supporters of the opera who praised the work as “sonorous and rich,”³⁰ and dramatically expressive tended to misrepresent Adams’s musical intentions. Initially, it was difficult

³⁰ Holmes, *The Houston Chronicle*,
http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl?id=1987_497539.

for reviewers to recognize minimalism as an end to musical expression, rather than its means. No matter how apt the music may be in terms of the moment-to-moment drama occurring on stage, Adams's true purpose in the score remains to continually enhance the overarching thematic elements that *Nixon in China* brings to bear. A review in *American Music* magazine by J. Thomas Rimer of the score's 1988 recording by Nonesuch Records provided the most insightful critical thoughts on Adams's musical intentions:

Nixon in China is a public piece in which the individual characters, whatever their personal foibles are caught up in the grand patterns of history. Yet in act 3, when Pat and Richard Nixon remember in a remarkably touching duet the years when he was a soldier...the score takes on the powerful resonances of existential loneliness: Richard recounts his life on an island in the Pacific making hamburgers for his buddies and Pat, lost in her own dreams, responds, 'Yes, dear, I think you told me that.' The materials for memory are small, but they are what we have, the opera suggests, and these sections of the opera creates an atmosphere of elegy rather than satire...the memory scenes of act 3 take on a rueful expansive musical dimension that is quite different in effect from the galloping rhythmic repetitions of the public scenes, written in the style for which is (in)famous. . . Heard on recordings and slightly removed from the concerns of the times in which it was written, the opera reveals much that seems moving and authentic in its dramatic and musical values as well as in its larger probings into the nature of the American psyche and our understanding of the meaning of the world for ourselves.³¹

Rimer's review demonstrates an understanding of the flexibility of Adams's compositional idiom, as well as its potential for engaging audiences' psyches on a larger scale. Adams presents the opera in a uniquely American mindset capable of resonating with a contemporary American audience through his musical distinction between public façade and personal isolation. Though the topic of the article was the original 1988 recording, the review was written in 1994. The six intervening years between the album's initial release and Rimer's review provided a cultural and temporal distance from

³¹ J. Thomas Rimer, "Review [Untitled]," *American Music* 12, no. 3 (1994): 338–41.

the events portrayed, as well as the opera's premiere necessary for renewed appreciation of the work's musical and dramatic innovation. This trend continued in reviews of subsequent performances in the United States and abroad.

Temporal Distance as a Classicizing Force: Critical Reception Post-1987

In performances of the opera since its initial premieres in Houston, New York City, and Washington D.C., critical opinion has become much less strikingly divided as to the work's dramatic and musical effectiveness. Even Martin Bernheimer, so harshly critical at the Houston opening, wrote of the minor performance in his native city of Los Angeles in 1990: "*Nixon in China* remains a problematic piece. It remains slick and superficial. . . . It sometimes mucks up character definition and muddles historic relationships. But it seems tighter now. It seems more urgent, more clever and, in some crucial cases, more subtle."³² While Bernheimer's account does not drip with exorbitant praise, it demonstrates an increased appreciation and understanding of the opera's intent.

Examination of *Nixon in China*'s later performances indicates that the opera's dramatic material has maintained – if not increased in—its cultural relevance. In Chicago, the *Daily Herald* stated that "rather than falling out of favor, American composer John Adams' landmark opera seems even more relevant today in view of China's rise from a poor, agricultural nation to a member of the world's economic elite."³³ After the 2008 Denver performances, Kyle MacMillan attested that "when it debuted, 'Nixon in China' sparked the inevitable controversy and created something of a sensation. The intervening 21 years allows us to further distance ourselves from the

³² Martin Bernheimer, "'Nixon' in Nixonland Music Center: 'Nixon in China' may not be a masterpiece, but some operas—like wine and cheese – improve with time," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 1990. http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-24/entertainment/ca-3984_1_opera-premiere (accessed 27 May, 2010).

³³ Bill Gowen, "'Nixon in China' breaches wall of time," *Daily Herald*, May 19, 2006. <http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:146184014> (accessed 21 May, 2010).

historical events depicted in the opera and see the work more clearly for what it is: an operatic masterpiece with a real chance of still being performed 50 or 100 more years from now.”³⁴ Unlike commentary from the initial premieres, later reviews were very interested in the continued relevancy of *Nixon in China*’s subject matter. Over two decades after its first performance, the opera has come to be examined less under the microscope of current affairs and more in terms of its insights into intercultural relationships and human nature. The general trend of increased critical appreciation for the work coincides with this shift from literal, historical analysis to inspection based in overarching observations and dramatic concepts.

The work’s dramatic elements that proved so troublesome for Bernheimer at the premiere, while still mildly problematic in the critic’s eyes received a greater level of artistic recognition. He described the portrayal of the President as “brash yet befuddled, surprisingly sympathetic and hardly ever shifty.”³⁵ Greater distance in cultural memory from the political underpinnings of the work seems to have provided Bernheimer with an increased sense of Nixon as a heroic figure, as opposed to Nixon as he appears in American popular culture. President Nixon’s was not the only dramatic depiction to obtain better treatment by Bernheimer at the 1990 performance. Chairman Mao received the description of “tough yet endearingly cynical.”³⁶

Bernheimer, as well as critics of subsequent performances demonstrated an increased appreciation of the opera’s characterizations. With greater temporal distance

³⁴ Kyle MacMillan, “Now more than ever, ‘Nixon in China’ shines,” *The Denver Post*. <http://www.denverpost.com/fdcp?1274738792003> (accessed 24 May, 2010)

³⁵ Bernheimer, *Los Angeles Times*, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-24/entertainment/ca-3984_1_opera-premiere.

³⁶ Bernheimer, *Los Angeles Times*, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-24/entertainment/ca-3984_1_opera-premiere.

from the controversial events occurring on stage, reviewers succeeded in separating themselves from inherent prejudices present in audiences' minds at the work's earliest performances. Almost a decade removed from the 1987 premiere, the negative cultural associations of *Nixon in China*'s characters have lost their potency, and the events portrayed have obtained a sense of historical perception. *Chicago Tribune* critic John von Rhein stated in a review of Nixon's 2006 debut at Chicago's Harris Theater, "The greatness of 'Nixon in China' lies in its timelessness, the ingenious way it transforms the banal pageant of world politics into modern myth."³⁷ This greater appreciation for the depiction of historic individuals and events allowed the dramatic portrayal of the work's characters as figures of contemporary myth to attain acceptance in the minds of later audiences with greater ease.

In the twenty-first century the Nixon administration's historic visit to Communist China is recognized as an extraordinary diplomatic achievement that worked to shape modern international politics. Robert Everett-Green explained in his review of the 2010 debut in Vancouver: "China's global economic importance makes Nixon's 1972 expedition (which happened a full five years before the United States and China opened formal diplomatic relations) look incredibly prescient."³⁸ The transition of *Nixon*'s subject matter from a political satirist's fodder to world-altering moment in political history has allowed for the dramatic intent of the work to come to the forefront: "[T]his

³⁷ John Von Rhein, "'Nixon' is one production all opera fans should see," *Chicago Tribune*, May 19, 2006.

<http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:145971103> (accessed 21 May, 2010).

³⁸ Robert Everett-Green, "'Nixon in China,' opening tonight in Vancouver, is an opera with an odd provenance, unexpected depths and brand new ironies," *The Globe and Mail*, March 13, 2010. <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/delivery> (accessed 27 May, 2010).

is not a "Saturday Night Live" presidential parody, but a deeply felt portrayal of one of the most compelling (and controversial) figures in American history."³⁹

In the intervening years since the opera's premiere, the powerful negative feelings associated with its principle characters have dimmed in cultural memory, allowing for the overarching statement of the opera to be foremost in the audience's minds. With the shame of Watergate and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution growing more and more historically distant, elements of the production first analyzed as politically naïve, have been reexamined as personally insightful. In a review of the recent 2010 performances in Vancouver, Robert Everett-Green of *The Globe and Mail* stated, "Goodman's version of Nixon was 'our presidential Everyman: banal, bathetic, sentimental, paranoid. . . Nixon's wife, Pat, a virtually mute figure during her decades as a political spouse, becomes in the opera an eloquent witness of the mystical wonders of ordinary things.'"⁴⁰ These characterizations of Richard and Pat Nixon, accused by many at the 1987 premiere as overly simplistic and forgiving have become recognized over time as an integral part of *Nixon in China*'s profundity.

Later performances of *Nixon in China* garnered heightened attention to the tension created by the adjacency of the political and the personal. Michael Anthony of the *Star Tribune* commented in his review of the 2005 premiere at the Minnesota Opera on the juxtaposition of the inner and outer selves of the opera's major characters, which

³⁹ Bill Gowen, "'Nixon in China' breaches wall of time," *Daily Herald*, May 19, 2006. <http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:146184014> (accessed 21 May, 2010).

⁴⁰ Robert Everett-Green, "Tricky Dick, operatic Everyman: Nixon in China, opening tonight in Vancouver, is an opera with an odd provenance, unexpected depths and brand new ironies," *The Globe and Mail*, March 13, 2010. <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/delivery> (accessed 27 May 2010).

had previously gone all but undetected in early reviews.⁴¹ Stage director for the Minnesota Opera, James Robinson received credit for this enhanced sense of juxtaposition through his staging of the opera's action amidst onstage television screens. "Robinson's chief innovation—rows of '70's-style television consoles showing home movies and video clips of Nixon's trip to China along with representations of each character's past life—adds to the suggestion that the public and the private are ever more intertwined and that television has become the stuff of our dreams."⁴²

Two years after the much-hailed Minneapolis debut, John Von Rhein stated in his *Chicago Tribune* review of the 2006 Opera Theater production, "Richard Nixon's breakthrough trip to China in 1972, during which he met Mao Tse-tung and launched relations between the superpowers, becomes a psychological mosaic about the collision of East and West, exposing the inner lives of small, tragic figures helpless before history."⁴³ These reviews indicate a deeper examination of the opera's dramatic intent and a heightened appreciation of the work's characterization of the historical figures it depicts. Recognition of the contrast between the personal and private lives can be directly linked to a greater understanding of the work's overall dramatic message.

Julie DuRose, critic for the popular Minnesota web magazine, *Aisle Say*, explained the interweaving of the personal and private lives of these historical figures as a necessary aspect of the work's dramatic integrity: "It is difficult to disentangle Nixon

⁴¹ Michael Anthony, "Classical Review: 'Nixon in China;' Opera purrs, roars and sings," *Star Tribune*, May 16, 2005.
<http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:132540767> (accessed 21 May 2010).

⁴² Anthony, *Star Tribune*,
<http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:132540767>.

⁴³ John Von Rhein, *Chicago Tribune*,
<http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:145971103>.

from a shallow caricature, jowls and all. But librettist Alice Goodman has. Scenes of the life of a public servant are followed by private moments with wife Pat. Nixon develops a full character who has deep emotions, desires and fears."⁴⁴ Not only does DuRose's review recognize the distinction between public and personal in the opera's characters, it also demonstrates that later critics tended to acknowledge Pat Nixon's full depth and complexity of character to a greater degree than their predecessors. Von Rhein called the First Lady "the work's most touching and complex figure."⁴⁵ Dramatically, the juxtaposition of Pat Nixon's demure public persona with the inner strength and sincerity of her private self attained more recognition in later performances than after the premiere. As with her husband's character, the passage of time has generated a greater sense of appreciation for Mrs. Nixon's multi-faceted artistic depiction.

A similarly increased grasp of the work's musical elements accompanied the improved understanding of *Nixon in China*'s dramatic effectiveness. Once more, Martin Bernheimer somewhat revoked his previously scathing review in response to later performances. He described the score in his review of the 1990 Los Angeles debut as possessing "unexpected expressive undertones and a surprising variety of light and shade in Adams' lush orchestration."⁴⁶ Like the work's politicized subject matter, Adams's postminimalist idiom gained relevance and subsequently, recognition as a viable source of musical expression. In response to a small performance in Cincinnati, Ohio in 2007, Tom McElfresh with the web magazine *City Beat* said of Adams's compositional style,

⁴⁴ Julie DuRose, "Nixon in China," *Aisle Say*, www.aislesay.com (accessed 25 May, 2010).

⁴⁵ John Von Rhein, *Chicago Tribune*, <http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:145971103>.

⁴⁶ Bernheimer, *Los Angeles Times*, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-24/entertainment/ca-3984_1_opera-premiere.

“Adams is sometimes described as a minimalist composer. Hearing the full stretch of Nixon...is to belie that notion. It’s too intricate, too detailed to qualify as minimalist... To repeat, the score is character in the drama.”⁴⁷ The word “minimalism,” still a relatively new concept outside strictly musical circles in 1987 gained respect as an important Western musical trend in intervening years. The definition of minimalism was no longer limited to the stereotypes of the idiom’s earliest pieces, which focused primarily on the phasing effect created by lengthy repetition inherently devoid of the teleological impulses that characterize Western music.⁴⁸ And as Adams himself no longer worked singularly within the minimalist or postminimalist genres, the concept of his music as an emotive artistic force was not an alien concept to audience members of later decades.

Possibly the most insightful musical commentary on the work came in 2000 after the opera’s performance in the United Kingdom at the London Coliseum. In a review by Robert Stein appearing in the contemporary music journal, *Tempo*:

Like other minimalist opera triumphs of the 1980s, the repetitive approach [to the score] suits the drama well. Where do we find repetition in our lives? In the phrase-making of politicians, on formal occasions—such as the banquet scene that concludes Act 1—and in the stammering uncertainty of individuals as they question their roles, particularly in the slightly over-restrained Act 3.⁴⁹

In terms of musical analysis, Stein’s comprehends many of the subtleties inherent within Adams’s score but often missed in prior examinations. He incorporates minimalism into the overarching dramatic underpinnings of the work, rather than discussing the music as

⁴⁷ Tom McElfresh, “John Adams’ score highlights marvelous production” *City Beat*. <http://www.citybeat.com/cincinnati/> (accessed 27 May, 2010).

⁴⁸ Fink, 28.

⁴⁹ Robert Stein, “London Coliseum: ‘Nixon in China,’” *Tempo* new series, no. 214 (2000): 43.

an element separate from the operatic plot and thematic material. As is fundamental to the overall operatic medium, Adams envisioned *Nixon in China*'s score as an integral part of the piece on every level, from the opera's actual, physical elements to its metaphysical dramatic implications.

The 2000 performance in London was not the only later performance to garner such musical attention. Julie DuRose referred to the relationship between Adams's score and Goodman's libretto as "dazzling moments of synergy."⁵⁰ Mention was also made in Tom McElfresh of *CityBeat*'s 2007 review at the Cincinnati Opera of the score's active participation in the unfolding story. "In 'Nixon,' the orchestra is an integral participant, not the accompanist to whatever the singers get up to. . . Adams uses the orchestra as the play's narrator, a character rather like the Stage Manager in 'Our Town', someone who is always there, guiding, connecting, interpreting, telling the story as the singers live it."⁵¹ The Cincinnati performance was not a highly publicized event, and later accused by other, larger opera companies as "jokey."⁵² But McElfresh's commentary on Adams's musical contribution to the opera's content indicated a high level of dramatic perception.

The efficaciousness of Nixon's score was brought to bear again at the 2008 Denver premiere. Kyle MacMillan of *The Denver Post* stated that ultimately "at the heart of this opera lies composer John Adams' ceaselessly inventive score, which is rooted in the driving repetition of minimalism but transcends it. A constant, sometimes surging rhythmic pulse runs through this evocative music, with appropriate dashes of wonder and

⁵⁰ DuRose, *AisleSay*, <http://www.aislesay.com>.

⁵¹ John McElfresh, *City Beat*, <http://www.citybeat.com>.

⁵² Mark Swed, "Critic's Notebook: Thankfully, we still have 'Nixon' to kick around," *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 2010, Part E, p. 1.
<http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/delivery> (accessed 27 May, 2010).

exoticism.”⁵³ The layering of musical textures in Adams’s score directly reflects the layering of political parody and interpersonal drama on stage, something previously overlooked in terms of both dramatic and musical intentions.

In addition to an increased understanding of *Nixon in China*’s score in its entirety, the musical representation of individual characters attained a heightened level of awareness from the work’s later critics. In particular, the musical treatment of Pat Nixon was recognized as an integral aspect of her character’s development. Her strength and dramatic importance came to the forefront in later reviews, as well as the duality present between her public and private personas. Reviews tended to focus on the integrity of Pat Nixon’s lyrical vocal lines in terms of her dramatic development. Robert Everett-Green observed in his review, “The chugging arpeggios and rippling scales of Adams’s minimalist craft drive several scenes, and are seldom absent altogether. But he also lets his lyrical muse run free. . . I was struck by how much beautiful must Pat Nixon gets to sing while she tours a model farm.”⁵⁴ The quantity and musical quality of Mrs. Nixon’s portrayal within the score further characterizes her as the work’s most sincere and, in many ways, most important character. Bill Gowen went so far as to refer to the First Lady’s persona as “larger-than-life” in his 2006 commentary.⁵⁵

President Nixon remained at the forefront of critical attention, as well. Strikingly, his character no longer attracted the harsh political commentaries it had in 1987. Nixon the man, as opposed to Nixon the politician proved the primary focus of later reviews. The synthesis between Nixon’s musical and dramatic portrayal attained a level of

⁵³ Kyle MacMillan, *The Denver Post*, <http://www.denverpost.com/fdcp?1274738792003>.

⁵⁴ Everett-Green, *Globe and Mail*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/delivery>.

⁵⁵ Gowen, *Daily Herald*, <http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:146184014>.

recognition unprecedented by reviews of the work's premiere. Robert Everett-Green stated, "Adams's music for him [Richard Nixon] mostly sounds sincere, and sometimes implies depths of tenderness that the real Nixon never showed in public."⁵⁶ Adams's score extends the portrayal of the President beyond mere political associations and popular culture. The Richard Nixon of *Nixon in China* is crafted through Goodman's libretto and Adams's compositional devices into a multi-faceted character of deep insecurity and enormous historical awareness. In the words of Mark Swed, "'Nixon' wasn't a political opera but a personal one. . . . it was not about what Nixon meant for China but what China meant for Nixon."⁵⁷

This understanding of the personal versus public aspects of Nixon's personality allows for the deeper intention of Adams's compositional choices. The musical portrayal of Nixon allows the character elements of introspection and emotional honesty that may go otherwise unperceived through the medium of spoken word alone. The Nixon who shares his innermost insecurities at the work's opening is different than the Nixon who shares a banquet with the leader of Communist China, or who painfully examines his marriage in the privacy of his bedroom. In early reviews, the complexity of the President's depiction did not achieve recognition above audiences' personal political leanings. The intervening decades between the opera's opening and its revitalization in the twenty-first century allowed for a greater sense of historical perspective. Richard Nixon was no longer perceived as the work's de facto villain, but a complex and introspective character worthy of heroic depiction.

⁵⁶ Everett-Green, *Globe and Mail*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/delivery>.

⁵⁷ Swed, *Los Angeles Times*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/delivery>.

Perhaps the most striking change between criticism of *Nixon in China*'s premiere and its later performances lies in the critical treatment of Chiang Ch'ing. She is one of the opera's most complex characters, and audiences' reactions to her depiction within the work indicate the depth of understanding attained by later critics. Martin Bernheimer, who referred to Madame Mao in his review of the 1987 premiere as "an erotic shrew," said her character in the 1990 performance exuded "menacing authority, political as well as erotic. . ."⁵⁸ The sense of eroticism remained at the forefront of Bernheimer's attention, but the positivity of the latter review implies an increased understanding of the artistic intent behind her portrayal.

Mark Swed of the *Los Angeles Times* called Madame Mao "a Chinese Queen of the Night."⁵⁹ Swed's is an apt description, both dramatically and musically. Chiang Ch'ing is the object of satire and parody, but also of some degree of sympathy. Pat Nixon earned John Von Rhein's praise, as the work's "most touching and complex character" while Madame Mao remained intense and aloof as "the weary Cold Warrior."⁶⁰ Unlike her American counterpart, Chiang Ch'ing does not present audiences with an idealized embodiment of her cultural experiences. Her position as "the weary Cold Warrior" creates an image of the harsher realities and extremes of Chinese Communism, no less genuine than the First Lady's American idealism reveled in her Act II arias.

⁵⁸ Bernheimer, *Los Angeles Times*, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-10-24/entertainment/ca-3984_1_opera-premiere.

⁵⁹ Swed, *Los Angeles Times*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/delivery>.

⁶⁰ Von Rhein, *Chicago Tribune*, <http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:145971103>.

With the improved grasp of Chiang Ch'ing's position within *Nixon in China* came increased appreciation for her musical portrayal via *The Red Detachment of Women*. The musical elements of the ballet that created such dissent among the work's earliest audiences received a very different reaction in performances after the premiere. David Gordon Duke of the *Vancouver Sun* described *The Red Detachment* as "a multi-layered ballet sequence that mocks derivative Red Chinese agitprop while revealing its intrinsic banality and malevolence."⁶¹ Duke's perception of the satirical elements inherent in Madame Mao's Socialist-Realist performance, and thus in Madame Mao herself, indicates a level of understanding not attained during the opera's twentieth-century performances. Adams's use of quotation during the scene, so criticized at the work's opening obtained equally improved critical perception during later performances. John Von Rhein cited Adams's compositional devices as invoking the ghosts of Handel and Wagner.⁶² Kissinger's role in the work at large, as well as the ballet has remained problematic for later critics, who still tended to consider him nothing more than a comic foil, called "the work's only real comic character."⁶³

Though later reviews did not consistently probe the depth of each character's artistic and musical intent, the overarching message of *Nixon in China* has achieved a deeper level of understanding with every subsequent performance. The intervening years between performances allow for clarity of perception in terms of the historical significance of the work's subject matter. The impact of the work on the operatic genre,

⁶¹ David Gordon Duke, "Vancouver Opera's 'Nixon in China' a brilliant Canadian premiere," *Vancouver Sun*, March 16, 2010. <http://www.vancouversun.com> (accessed 24 May, 2010).

⁶² Von Rhein, *Chicago Tribune*.

⁶³ Anthony, *Star Tribune*.

and the cultural relevance of the opera itself also attained increased visibility in later performances. Robert Everett-Green provided one of the most insightful commentaries on the social pertinence of *Nixon in China* in his review of the 2010 Vancouver premiere:

As musicologist Richard Taruskin writes in *his Oxford History of Western Music*, ‘in the disillusioned aftermath of World war I, audiences enjoyed an operatic genre that debunked the myth of timeless art.’ In the super-affluent triumphant post-Cold War decade, audiences sought, through art, the monumentalization of their own historical experience.⁶⁴

Everett-Green brings to bear the notion of *Nixon in China* as something greater than a political, or even heroic piece. Rather, the opera is a response to cultural anxieties and a desire to legitimize a generation’s experiences via the grandiosity of the operatic medium. From this perspective, *Nixon* serves a purpose within American culture greater than musical entertainment. It embodies an era’s greatest triumphs and insecurities. It presents the uncertainty of political history in the making, and the social and personal triumphs that occasionally arise from it.

⁶⁴ Everett-Green, *The Globe and Mail*,
<http://www.lexisnexus.com/us/Inacademic/delivery>.

An American Opera Abroad: International Reception, 1992–2000

Shortly after its debut in Houston, Texas, *Nixon in China* secured a series of international performances in Paris, Australia, Germany, Finland, and a concert performance in the United Kingdom. Considering the distinctly American nature of the work's subject matter and compositional idiom, it was received relatively well abroad. Many of the same musical and dramatic discourses that had occupied the minds of American critics were present in the writings of international reviewers. The varied responses to issues of dramatic development, juxtaposition, and the music's relationship to the drama indicate the artistic reach of the opera beyond its contemporary political implications. *Nixon in China*'s international debuts exposed the work to audiences that did not possess the cultural memory and deep emotional history Americans associated with the events portrayed on stage. The critical interpretation of the opera's dramatic elements apart from political associations demonstrates its potential in terms of universal understanding and success as a musical work.

When *Nixon in China* premiered in Adelaide, Australia as the major feature of the 1992 Adelaide Festival, John Shmith, a music critic from Sydney commented prior to the work's opening, "Richard and Pat Nixon will walk down the stairs of the Spirit of '76 and Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong will briefly live again. All in a city that none of them

has actually visited.”⁶⁵ The nature of the opera’s story as a historical narrative of American politics and Sino-American foreign relations made it particularly interesting in terms of international reception. Elements of the political history in the piece, so inherent in the collective American memory, do not possess the same cultural associations internationally. Despite the issue of cultural detachment in both Australia and the other countries involved in *Nixon*’s international premieres, audiences possessed clear grasp of the work in terms of dramatic development and discourse. Roland de Beer of the international music periodical *Key Notes* said at the work’s 1994 debut in Helsinki, Finland: “Opera characters, as normally created, are phantasms who in the best of cases convince the listener that they are flesh and blood. Unique in the Sellars’ staging of *Nixon in China* is that real-life people. . . were slowly transformed into phantoms.”⁶⁶ This is a fitting description of the infamous characters’ progression from beings of historical pomp and circumstance to the imagined realm of the inner-self.

De Beer was not the only international critic to discuss the dramatic progression from the political to the personal. In an interview with John Schmith of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, director of the Adelaide production, Gail Edwards, spoke of the tension between the inner and outer worlds of the opera’s characters. “As a director, one must ask, where is the dramatic tension on stage? My answer is that it lies in the tension between the public façade and the private thoughts.”⁶⁷ Reviewers of the premiere in Frankfurt, Germany (1992) also contributed analysis on this dramatic, “inner versus

⁶⁵ John Shmith, “Milhous in Moderato”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 22, 1992, pg. 44

⁶⁶ Roland de Beer, “Re-inventing the wheel on a moving train,” *Key Notes* 20, no. 4 (1994): 9-14

⁶⁷ Lance Campbell, “Tricky Dickey,” *The Advertiser*, February 1, 1992. <http://www.lexisnex.com> (accessed 08, June 2010).

outer" juxtaposition. Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich, of *Das Orchester* magazine described the opera as a gradual transition from the real and substantial to the surreal and ethereal.⁶⁸

Jungheinrich explained the Nixons' involvement in Madame Mao's socialist-realist ballet as the culminating break between historical reality and artistic fantasy.⁶⁹ This sentiment echoes de Beer's statements about the Helsinki performance. Reviewers from both countries reached an understanding of the dramatic progression and intentions despite cultural and lingual differences. (The Frankfurt premiere was performed in German, the Helsinki performance in English.)

As in the United States, not all international critics agreed with this inherently politically charged dramatic stance. At the Bielefeld performance, Klaus Kirchberg of *Opernwelt* magazine heavily criticized the opera's lack of satire and artistically kind treatment of some of history's most controversial figures. He referred to President Nixon and Mao Zedong's initial meeting in the Chairman's study as unusually trivial and Pat Nixon's interference with the Red Detachment as "heroically naïve, at best."⁷⁰ He was also starkly opposed to the rose-colored view of the controversial characters Nixon, Mao and Chou Enlai. The heroic stance of the opera was criticized for its lack of political realism and as in United States the absence of satire was seen as confusing and naïve on the librettist's part.

At the 1998 concert performance at the Barbican Hall in London, the heroic stance of *Nixon in China* was equally misunderstood. Music critic for London's *The Evening Standard*, Tom Sutcliffe said, "This is an opera with much (perhaps inadvertent)

⁶⁸ Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich, "Geschichte, ins Bodenlose fallend; John Adams und seine Opera 'Nixon in China,'" *Das Orchester* 40 (1992), no. 10, 1201.

⁶⁹ Jungheinrich, 1201.

⁷⁰ Klaus Kirchberg, "Bielefeld; Adams' 'Nixon in China,'" *Opernwelt* 31 (1990), 48-49.

humor and irony. Nixon is not a tragic figure. Librettist Alice Goodman says she aimed to be heroic, not satirical. Yet the result is as ironical as Handel's 'Julius Caesar.'⁷¹ The first performance in the United Kingdom was done without staging, which can be held partly responsible for the misinterpretation of the piece's dramatic workings. Much of the perception of the opera's artistic sincerity and heroism is found in its physical portrayal of the monumental in juxtaposition to Act 3's portrayal of the character's deep insecurity and humanity. Without this critical element, the piece was mistaken for farcical theater. Despite the librettist's dramatic intent, the lack of satirical humor was almost ignored. Critics of the Barbican Hall performance saw political humor in many facets of the work not necessarily intended by either Goodman or Adams. Keith Potter of *The Independent* described Nixon as possessing a "strong vein of satirical humor."⁷² Like many reviewers of the Houston world premiere, the intended sincerity of *Nixon in China* was exchanged for elements of sarcasm and satire.

International critics were less interested in the musical and dramatic relationships than their American counterparts, but those who mentioned Adams's score discussed many of the same issues brought to bear at the Houston premiere. Lotte Thaler, a German music critic, commented on the work's score in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. He explained the score's minimalist elements as a musical compliment to the banality and parody of international politics dramatically portrayed.⁷³ Adams's post-minimalist compositional style was deemed highly appropriate in light of the artistic goals of both

⁷¹ Tom Sutcliffe, "Bewitching, and popular success for the years to come," *The Evening Standard*, January 28, 1998.

⁷² Keith Potter, "'Nixon in China' Barbican Hall, London/Radio 3: The greatest scandal since Watergate?" *The Independent*, January 29, 1998.

⁷³ Lotte Thaler, "Strapazen eines Staatsbesuchs: John Adams' 'Nixon in China' in Bielefeld," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 151 (1990), 29-30.

staging and libretto. At the Helsinki performance, however, the music was heavily criticized. Its use of quotation during *The Red Detachment* was castigated as an example of the composer's lack of originality. Adams's score was accused of insubstantiality and an inability to convey the emotional gravity of the drama.⁷⁴ Similar concerns were raised at the Bielefeld performance. Klaus Kirchberg claimed, "The actual author of the boredom of the piece is John Adams," and he compared the minimalist textures of the composer's orchestration to the mass-produced glass elephant Pat Nixon encountered in the opera.⁷⁵ When Pat enquires as to the figurine's origins, the peasant workers proudly respond that hundreds of identical glass elephants are made every day. According to Kirchberg, Adams's score is of a similar, homogenous origin.

International critic did not broach Adams's musical distinction between the political and the personal in the characterization of the work's political dignitaries. The idea of the lonely sanctity of the individual in contrast with the grandeur of each character's political accomplishments seems to reverberate primarily with American audiences. When it received a fully staged production in the United Kingdom in 2000, Robert Stein's review mentioned the element of music's participation in juxtaposing the public and the personal. This element of the opera was not at the forefront of attention in other European or Australian reviews. In later performances of the *Nixon* in the United States, this concept proved to be of foremost importance in terms of critical understanding of the work. Its lack of critical recognition abroad brings to bear the question of cultural attitude and memory in the opera's reception.

⁷⁴ De Beer, "Re-inventing the Wheel," 13.

⁷⁵ Kirchberg, *Opernwelt*, 49.

The overarching critical response to *Nixon in China* internationally was similar to initial reception in the United States, but for the perception of the artistic intentions of the piece. The absence of satire was confusing in the minds of the many critics and audiences abroad, particularly at the Barbican Hall concert performance. In Europe, political humor was assigned to the drama in place of the intended heroism. Whereas reviewers criticized the work's Houston premiere as politically naïve for its lack of satire, many British critics simply refused to see the opera as anything but a political farce. Music critics in *The Evening Standard* and *The Independent* praised *Nixon* for its humor, rather than berating the work for its attempt at candid, human portrayal. Elsewhere, and despite cultural distance from the events and characters portrayed in the opera, international critics worked to understand the dramatic and musical relationships inherent within the work. German, Finnish and Australian reviewers were primarily receptive to the groundbreaking and contemporary subject matter and, in many cases, understood the post-modern juxtaposition between actuality and personal imagination better than the first American audiences. Musical opinions remained starkly divided abroad as in the United States, but the similarities of issues broached in reviews from all international debuts imply the universality of the score and the opera as a cohesive artwork, even when misunderstood in terms of dramatic affinity.

To the New York Metropolitan Opera and Beyond: *Nixon in China* as a Contemporary Classic

On February 2, 2011 *Nixon in China* debuted at the New York Metropolitan Opera. The move to the Met stage marked, for many, the final verdict as to *Nixon*'s status in the operatic repertoire, and the subsequent critical commentaries continue to probe the depth of the work's contemporary relevance. Anne Midgette of *The Washington Post* said, "The evening was about the move from edginess to canonization."⁷⁶ This "canonization" is evidenced by an increased critical appreciation and understanding of the opera across almost all critical fronts. An entirely new generation of critics than those present at the 1987 Houston opening weighed in on the opera's musical and dramatic merit. *The New York Times*, whose Donal Henahan previously claimed that "Mr. Adams does for the arpeggio what McDonald's did for the hamburger" presented a review by Anthony Tommasini with an entirely different approach to the work: "In the subdued orchestra, overlapping patterns of ascending minor scales create a hypnotic, quietly intense backdrop pierced by fractured, brassy chords like some cosmic chorale."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ann Midgette, "Finally, East Meets Upper West Side," *The Washington Post*, February 4, 2011. <http://www.lexisnexis.com/> (accessed 22 March, 2011).

⁷⁷ Anthony Tommasini, "President and Opera, on Unexpected Stages," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/arts/music/04nixon.html> (accessed 22, March 2011).

Reviews of the latest performance indicate a continuing increase in audience perceptions of Adams's musical idiom as it relates to the work's dramatic content.

Postminimalism as a means of characterization and dramatic expression, an element of *Nixon in China* often misunderstood by critics of the last two decades, has reached a new level of acceptance in reviews the work's Metropolitan Opera debut. John Terauds of *The Toronto Star* wrote, "Music is an essential ingredient. Although labeled as minimalist, Adams's rhythmically complex score is much more than that. It is an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of rhythm and melody that almost imperceptibly shift with each twist of the plot, to underpin a fresh mood and thrust."⁷⁸ The emotional flexibility of Adams's score no longer raises an issue in audiences' perceptions. With the adoption of the work at the Metropolitan Opera, the compositional idiom seems to have attained a level of recognition and appreciation not present in even the recent 2010 performances.

The opera's portrayal of its emotionally volatile characters has enjoyed a similarly increased degree of acknowledgement in conjunction with the Met debut. Tommasini best expressed this in his analysis of Nixon's quintessential first aria, saying, "Soon after Nixon is greeted by Chou, the president breaks into the 'News' aria. . . . And here the staccato vocal writing perfectly conveys Nixon's awkward stiffness and self-consuming power."⁷⁹ This understanding of the synthesis between the libretto and the musical score in Nixon's characterization serves as a cornerstone in the increased critical appreciation of the opera in its entirety. In 2011, the President as either a purely parodistic or heroic

⁷⁸ John Terauds, "Nixon in China Becomes More Relevant Over Time," *The Toronto Star*, February 5, 2011. <http://www.lexisnexis.com/> (accessed 22 March, 2011).

⁷⁹ Tommasini, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/arts/music/04nixon.html>.

figure no longer remains at the forefront of audiences' attention. The overarching artistic intentions and representations of the work more thoroughly capture critical attention.

Evolution of the work's dramatic portrayal during the Met premiere has aided this increase of critical understanding. Mark Swed, an early champion of *Nixon* explained:

Characterizations have deepened and the opera has darkened over the years, some of it in reaction to revelations about the horrors of Mao's reign that have come to light since the premiere. But the opera has always been less a moral statement than an examination of what drives powerful men. . . . Sellars treats the Chinese less sympathetically than he had at first, adding an edge to the philosophical Chou and making Mao not only inscrutable, but creepily decrepit. Kissinger is no longer quite so leeringly Groucho-esque.⁸⁰

Swed's commentary indicates the impact of historical reevaluation on *Nixon in China's* subject matter. Other reviews after 1987 did not bring this element of the work's perception to the forefront with as much certainty as critical commentaries of the Met debut. The artistic and historical significance of the venue itself encouraged further reassessment of the opera and its characters. Nixon's operatic facsimile—like the historical original—received the greatest reevaluation in contemporary culture.

Many critics of the Metropolitan Opera production reflect this shift in perception with greater acuity than their predecessors. Nixon is no longer decried as the villain, and Adams's no longer accused of creating a "too-sympathetic" portrayal of American culture's most hated political figure. Remarkably, one of the few critiques leveled at the opera's most recent performance was that it fails to probe Nixon's character deeply enough. Max Frankel, the journalist who accompanied the President on his 1972 journey

⁸⁰ Mark Swed, "'Nixon in China' at the New York Metropolitan Opera," *The Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 2011. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/02/opera-review-nixon-in-china-at-the-metropolitan-opera.html> (accessed 22 March, 2011).

and won a Pulitzer Prize for his report of the event, attended the Met debut. He wrote, "[T]he devious Richard M. Nixon who haunts my generation and who still speaks to us on tape embodies a lot more intrigue, pretension and paranoia than the smooth Nixon baritone up onstage."⁸¹ His assessment of Nixon's operatic portrayal marks a general shift in attitude toward the former President that pervades popular culture of the twenty-first century. Critics at the 2011 performance indicated a desire for the revelation of Nixon's inner psyche.

Anne Midgette joined Frankel in criticizing *Nixon in China* for an oversimplification of the opera's characters. "[T]his opera never gets too private because the figures remain symbols rather than real people. The point doesn't seem to be to give insight into the characters."⁸² The position of *Nixon*'s characters as representations of their cultures at large does not go undetected in the latest generation of critics, as it had during the work's earlier performances. Rather, the dramatic device is realized, but sometimes critiqued for its lack of personal depth. Twenty-four years after its world premiere, the historic figures in the opera have become subjects of enough intrigue to suggest a personal evaluation without defamation.

Midgette and Frankel's position remained among the minority of critical opinions, however. Many applauded Adams's for his dignified treatment of individuals who so often serve as satiric fodder. Matthew Gurewitsch of *The New York Times* said of the opera's dramatic stance, "What at first glance may look like lampoon often devolves into the intense, dreamlike free associations characteristic of 'Einstein on the Beach,' as when

⁸¹ Max Frankel, "A Witness Sees History Restaged and Rewritten," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com> (accessed 22 March, 2011 via <http://www.lexisnexis.com>).

⁸² Midgette, *The Washington Post*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com>.

Nixon disembarks, exchanges courtesies with Premiere Chou En-lai on the tarmac and explodes into an aria of sputtering euphoria.”⁸³ Kyle MacMillan, who praised the 2008 Denver performance, claimed that “[*Nixon in China*] is less a drama in any conventional sense and more a kind of episodic meditation on the momentous event that inspired the opera and the historic characters involved in it.”⁸⁴ Most critics considered the mythologizing elements of the opera an essential contribution to the work’s continued success and contemporary relevance.

Nixon in China premiered with the Canadian Opera Company in concurrence with its Metropolitan Opera debut. Though a production of a much smaller scale, the performances in Toronto, Ontario continue to speak to the longevity of the opera. The Met premiere has provided the work with a sense of recognition absent in even the most well received premieres since 1987. Even the work’s most adamant critics seem to have come to terms with *Nixon in China*’s place in the operatic repertoire. Anne Midgette seems to provide the final verdict for the opera, across all spectrums of critical appreciation: “[W]hen I think about all of the faults in the other operas that I have no problem embracing in the standard repertory, I can only second what seemed to be the opinion of the audience: that it is a happy thing when a contemporary work comes full circle and takes its place among them.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Matthew Gurewitsch, *The New York Times*, “Still Resonating from the Great Wall,” January 30, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com> (accessed via <http://lexisnexis.com>, 22 March, 2011).

⁸⁴ Kyle MacMillan, *The Denver Post*, “Commentary Met beams ‘Nixon in china’ Live Nationwide Today,” February 12, 2011. <http://www.lexisnexis.com/> (accessed 22 March, 2011).

⁸⁵ Midgette, *The Washington Post*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com>.

Summary

Nixon in China is no doubt one of the most influential American operas of the twentieth century. Despite starkly divided critical reception, the work's recent resurgence in popularity testifies to its continued dramatic relevance. The misunderstandings prevalent throughout many of the opera's initial reviews, along with the varying perceptions of international audiences have ceased to be the prevailing sentiment in critical analyses over the last decade. Audiences have become less concerned with the outward politics of the work and more interested in *Nixon in China* as a postmodern juxtaposition of the publicly documented and privately imagined facets of cultural history. The work is neither a satirical nor a heroic opera, but rather a synthesis of these elements that creates a work of striking realism and grand imagination and metaphor.

The increased appreciation and grasp of the opera's content can be accredited, in part, to the growing historical distance of the subject matter. In 1987, all the work's major characters with the exception of Mao Zedong and Chou Enlai were still living. Now, after *Nixon in China*'s February 2011 Metropolitan Opera debut, only Henry Kissinger remains alive. Audience expectations of the portrayals of these figures have changed with the passage of time and the reassessment of history that often accompanies it. In the late 1980's, the disgraceful end to Richard Nixon's presidency still cast a shadow over the political realm in American minds. He was an object of farce, not opera. Over three decades after Watergate scandalized a nation, Nixon's presidency has been

reexamined under a less judgmental light. And while memories of Mao's tyrannical leadership of Communist China remains fraught with violence, he too has become an object of historical fascination in the Western world. This growing sense of temporal distance from the characters and events of *Nixon in China* have allowed for increased progressivism in the approach to the opera's dramatic elements. In the last decade, patrons have ceased to examine *Nixon* in terms of its historic accuracy or apparent political stance and have instead considered the production's less conspicuous undertones of postmodern juxtaposition and symbolism.

Minimalist and post-minimalist musical aesthetics have grown steadily more mainstream since the 1980's and the premiere of *Nixon*. At the time of its debut, Adams's score was still something of a novelty in terms of the operatic medium. Its minimalist components were often critiqued as dramatically confusing and emotionally stagnant. Those critics who praised the score did so only for its luscious timbre and Adams's orchestration abilities. Its dramatic aptitude did not achieve recognition until the composer's idiom had become more widely understood and accepted as a valid form of musical expression. The opera's revitalization in the United States came well after Adams had premiered *The Death of Klinghoffer* and – all but the 2004 performance in Minneapolis – after the first performances of his 2005 work, *Dr. Atomic*. This tells of a greater acquaintance with his postminimalist genre and its pairing with contemporary operatic drama.

In more recent American reviews, analysis of Adams's score has increased in depth. The score has become understood as more than an amalgamation of shimmering orchestral textures and layered ostinatos. Similar to the former President and Chairman,

the passage of time has permitted a reevaluation of postminimalism as an operatic medium. The dramatic intent of the opera is best expressed through Adams's compositional style. The repetitious nature of minimalism accompanies the parody of the endless gesture inherent in international politics, and the idiomatic nature of his compositional idiom echoes the recognized rhythms of his historical subjects' speech. His music achieves a large emotional scope that echoes the gradual transition into the personal realm of the work's characters.

The depth of meaning within the musical and dramatic aspects of *Nixon in China* stems from the juxtaposition between the monumental gesture of Red China and America's historic encounter and the deeply insecure, small individuals captured in the final act. The underlying purpose of the work is not satirical, nor purely heroic. The characters are not to be viewed from an angle that places them above their historical context but rather seen from within their psyches. When contrasted against their clear, sometimes daringly weak humanity, the deeds of Richard Nixon, Pat Nixon, Chou Enlai, and even Mao Zedong become heroic, though the repetitious gestures parodied throughout suggest meaninglessness in their actions. Historically, nothing of great political significance was achieved at the President's first meeting with Chairman Mao, no new alliances were forged, nor any great understanding between the Communist and Capitalist world powers was achieved. What did occur was an intimation of world relations that would come to affect the Eastern and Western worlds for decades to come.

To trace the critical reception of an opera that depicts this monumental event is to follow the path of an increased cultural understanding of the impacts of history, and to witness how these changes in cultural memory affect critical opinion of a contemporary,

highly politicized work of art. *Nixon in China* has traversed the distance from controversial novelty to modern operatic icon because the events it chronicles have also become recognized as a truly world-altering event. In 1987, President Nixon's trip to Red China was, for many, still an act based in diplomatic posturing and hinged only on Nixon's poll rankings in the United States. Almost thirty years later, the political landscape between the U.S. and China have been irrevocably altered by a chain of international events that began, in part, because of Nixon and Mao's meeting. In this light, *Nixon in China*'s heroic stance seems the only possible outcome of an opera based on events that changed the face of East-West relations, and a positive change in the critical reception of the work indicates, in part, recognition of the groundbreaking nature of the opera itself and the historical occasion it depicts.

Bibliography

- Adams, John. *Nixon in China* (vocal score). Hendon Music, 1999.
- Bernard, John W. "Minimalism, Postminimalism, and the Resurgence of Tonality in Recent American Music." *American Music* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 112-133. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3250558> (accessed 17 January, 2011).
- Dai, Jinhua. "Behind Global Spectacle and National Image Making." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 161-186. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pos/summary/v009/9.1dai.html> (accessed 17 January, 2011).
- Daines, Matthew. "Telling the Truth About Nixon: Parody, Cultural Representation, and Gender Politics in John Adams's Opera *Nixon in China*." Ph.D. diss., University of California, Davis, 1994.
- Daines, Matthew and Peter Sellars. "'Nixon in China': An Interview with Peter Sellars." *Tempo* new series, no. 197 (July 1996): 12-19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/944430> (accessed 4 January, 2010).
- Daines, Matthew. "'Nixon's Women: Gender Politics and Cultural Representation in Act 2 of 'Nixon in China.'" *The Musical Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 6-34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/742514> (accessed 17 January, 2011).
- Fink, Robert. *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Highfield, Jane. "The Death of Klinghoffer." *Tempo* new series, no. 178 (September 1991): 29-30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/945003> (accessed 4 January, 2010).
- Kraft, Leo. "The Death of Klinghoffer." *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 1 (Winter, 1992): 300-302. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/833304>. (accessed 4 January, 2010).

Nashel, Jonathan. "I Love Nixon." *American Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (March 2010): 165-171. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aq/summary/v062/62.1.nashel.html> (accessed 17 January, 2011).

Porter, Andrew and John Adams. "'Nixon in China': John Adams in Conversation." *Tempo* new series, no. 167 (December 1988): 25-30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/945213> (accessed 17 May, 2010).

Swed, Mark. "John Adams." *The Musical Times* 130, no. 1761 (November, 1989): 662-664. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1193777> (accessed 17 January, 2011).

Taruskin, Richard. "Sacred Entertainments." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 15, no. 2 (July 2003): 109-126. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3878330> (accessed 4 January, 2010).